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■ THE VETERANS SPEAK

No Regrets— We'd Do It Again

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It was like surviving the Charge of the Light Brigade. "Someone had blundered," as Tennyson put it. This was Brigade 2506, the Cuban exile force that went ashore at the Bay of Pigs on April 17, twenty-five years ago. In a nightmare of fighting against an overwhelming force, 103 in the ill-equipped brigade were killed and 1,189 were taken prisoner. Four U.S. pilots foresaw a massacre and, disobeying orders, joined with brigade pilots and flew into combat in lumbering old B-26s. They were killed, shot down over the Bay of Pigs by Castro's fighter planes. In an international embarrassment to the United States, the prisoners were paraded before television cameras and the diplomatic corps in Havana. They languished in a Cuban prison until being freed in December 1962, when President Kennedy arranged payment of \$53 million in food and medical supplies.

Who were these survivors and what has become of them in the ensuing quarter-century? What happened to the secret agents trained by the Central Intelligence Agency to operate in Cuba to prepare an underground network prior to the invasion? Who do they think made the "blunder," and what lessons do they feel they have learned?

On a recent trip to Miami, I interviewed twenty of the surviving brigade members. At the time of the invasion they ranged in age from 18 to 40 and were from varied social and economic backgrounds. Most of the secret agents were between 19 and 23 years of age. The C.I.A. had put the latter through a rigorous screening process which included polygraph examinations, high-security-clearance investigations and tests for intelligence and physical ability.

A senior U.S. intelligence officer commented: "I wish the C.I.A. were as exigent in selecting its own agency personnel." Of the eighty-two agents, seventeen were either caught and executed or killed trying to escape. The others managed to make their way back to the United States. In addition to carrying out assigned tasks of espionage and sabotage, they trained many anti-Castro Cubans, who in turn came under C.I.A. control. Many of those local agents

were killed when the invasion failed. Some escaped to Florida and, although not official members of the brigade, they are regarded by fellow exiles as heroes. A few of the regular agents and those they trained continued to work for the agency, but after the missile crisis of 1962 their missions to Cuba were limited to intelligence gathering. In 1964 some forty-two brigade members participated in a C.I.A. operation to support then-Congolese President Joseph Kasavubu against a communist incursion from Tanzania. Two brigade pilots were killed during the fighting.

The brigade remained intact in Miami; the 1,800 survivors were stunned by what had happened to them but remained convinced that the U.S. government would soon use them again in a liberation effort. That belief was enhanced when President Kennedy reviewed them at the Orange Bowl on December 30, 1962. Their commander, Dr. Manuel Artime, presented the brigade flag to the President. The stadium cheered wildly when Kennedy promised them he would soon return the flag to them in a "free Havana."

But it was not to be. After the October missile crisis Kennedy promised the Russians he would not intervene in Cuba, and the brigade became a political embarrassment to the President. He asked Joseph Califano, at the time a political

adviser on Defense Secretary Robert McNamara's staff, to break up the brigade's leadership. Califano delegated the job to Col. Alexander Haig, who arranged commissions in the U.S. armed forces for more than 150 of them and found good jobs or educational opportunities for others.

About half of those who received commissions were discharged after a few years, but sixty-three of them went on to serve with distinction in Vietnam. Of those, four were killed in action and three wounded. "We could see the irony of fighting what was perceived to be a Communist threat halfway round the world while our nearby homeland was in the iron grip of Fidel Castro," recalled Maj. Modesto Castañer, now retired. "But in our frustration we were eager to fight Communists wherever they might be."

A few of the C.I.A.-trained agents, however, refused to abandon the fight against Castro. They joined independent groups of exiles dedicated to carrying out operations inside Cuba whenever feasible. Without the knowledge of the C.I.A., according to them, they conducted sabotage in Cuba and harassed Cuban diplomats in Mexico and other countries. Those activities created a problem for the Federal Bureau of Investigation, which is charged with enforcing U.S. neutrality laws. The Bureau made a concerted effort to prevent illegal exile activities directed at targets inside as well as outside the United States. As one F.B.I. agent told me, "We were sympathetic to the cause of a free Cuba but could not condone illegal acts." Brigade members did not approve of acts of violent protest in the United States, believing the adverse public reaction would be counterproductive.

Harold Feeney, commander, U.S. Navy Intelligence, retired, was chief of the Cuba Branch of the Defense Intelligence Agency in 1962 and helped Alexander Haig select former brigade agents for commissions in the U.S. armed forces.

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With respect to operations outside the country, the C.I.A. had done such a good job of training the agents to work clandestinely that few were intercepted. Néstor (Tony) Izquierdo, head of a Cuban exile group called the National Liberation Front (F.N.L.), learned that one of his colleagues had been jailed in Mexico for activities against the Cuban Embassy. In March 1976, Izquierdo flew to Mexico and, disguised as a police officer, entered the prison and liberated his comrade. During the Nicaraguan revolution he was killed fighting as a volunteer against a rebel group that he identified as a Castro-trained communist faction, leaving a widow and twin sons. To the brigade and the exile community he is a hero and a martyr.

In 1967, Castro's chief lieutenant, Ernesto (Che) Guevara, was in Bolivia exhorting the peasants to revolt. One of the brigade's former agents, who does not wish to be identified, said he paid his own way to Bolivia and volunteered to help Bolivian authorities track down Guevara. The C.I.A. and U.S. military advisers had trained Bolivian troops in counterinsurgency techniques, but, according to David Atlee Phillips, a top C.I.A. official, that was the only official U.S. involvement. A peasant woman revealed the place where Guevara was hiding. Phillips also said the agency wanted Guevara alive, but the Bolivian military insisted on executing him. The former brigade agent, who had talked to Guevara at length, was in the camp when the revolutionary leader was shot.

Robert (Tico) Herrera, one of the anti-Castro exiles who had been trained by brigade agents in Cuba, had also been

one of Castro's lieutenants. He joined Cuban Representation in Exile (RECE), a group founded by José Bosch Lamarque, then an executive of the Bacardi rum company. Based in Florida, Herrera and a team of ten men made numerous clandestine forays into Cuba, evading Castro's security forces and, on the return trip, the F.B.I. Herrera was killed in an ambush in 1969 in Pinar del Río Province.

Another who continued his activities was Alonso (El Curita) González, a former Protestant minister. He was captured and escaped twice. In a desperate effort to get his wife and child out of Cuba, he learned to fly in Miami and in 1967 piloted a light plane to a remote airstrip in eastern Cuba, where his wife and child waited. But an informer had tipped off the authorities: González was arrested and executed on the spot.

One of the most successful exile groups, known as Comando Mambisi, drew on the expertise of the C.I.A.-trained agents and operated several years after the invasion. In 1964, some of its members sabotaged the Matahambre nickel mines in Pinar del Río. That same year another anti-Castro group, called Comandos L, infiltrated Cuba and exploded a mine against the hull of a Soviet merchant ship in Havana harbor. When one of the group's members, Tony Cuesta, faced certain capture, he attempted to kill himself rather than endanger his fellow agents. Although he exploded a grenade two feet from his head, he lived, losing both eyes and a hand. After spending eighteen years in Castro's harshest prison, he was freed and now resides in Miami.

The story of Brigade 2506 is one of valor in combat and in the lonely business of being a secret agent. "How would you feel if your country was in the hands of a Communist dictatorship and you were on the outside? What chances would you take?" one of the members asked me.

In eastern Cuba just before the invasion, Rodolfo (Sea Fury) Hernández volunteered for an important mission, although he was told his chances of surviving it were only one in ten. He knew he was most familiar with the terrain to be covered. He now works for the U.S. Postal Service in Miami and is a lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Army Reserve. "Yes, I'll be ready if they call me," he told me.

The four pilots who died trying to save the beachhead occupy a special place in the hearts of brigade members, who also feel a bond with other U.S. agents, from the C.I.A. and U.S. Navy Intelligence, who risked their careers and sometimes their lives for the cause. To this day those agents are referred to by their old code names—Pecos Bill, Quixote and Tobacco.

Under the leadership of Miguel M. Álvarez, who became president of the Association of Combatants of the Bay of Pigs in 1978, former brigade members adopted a policy of giving international support to any organization fighting Cuba-directed actions worldwide. A team of six brigade members went to Zaire that year and signed a mutual aid pact with former Angolan President Holden Roberto, now leader of the National Liberation Front of Angola. While there, they carried out psychological warfare to induce some of the 20,000 Cuban troops stationed in Angola to defect. Roberto agreed to help liberate Cuba after achieving victory in his own country. Before they could have any significant success, pressure created by the Clark amendment, which barred military assistance to antigovernment rebels in Angola, put a stop to their activities. The amendment has since been revoked, and the brigade has again begun to aid Angolan rebels. Last September 28, Roberto and brigade leaders met in Miami and renewed their original agreement. On that occasion, the brigade petitioned Representative Claude Pepper of Florida to include Roberto's forces among the beneficiaries of the aid package for Angolan rebel leader Jonas Savimbi now before Congress.

The brigade's help for the *contras* in Nicaragua has been more concrete. Miguel Álvarez led a delegation to Central America last August and met with Enrique Bermúdez, a military leader of the Nicaraguan Democratic Force, and one Comandante Aureliano, an F.D.N. political leader, to coordinate delivery of medical supplies, food and clothing. Aureliano visited Miami last September to take part in fund-raising drives, which netted about \$50,000 for supplies.

In Miami former agent José Basulto keeps in touch with *contra* leaders by short-wave radio to coordinate shipments of what he says are nonmilitary supplies. Brigade members told me they purchase the supplies with their own funds and money donated by the Cuban community in Miami.

Gabriel Gómez del Río, a brigade survivor and a retired major in the U.S. Army, served as executive director for Latin American Affairs on the National Defense Council, a nonprofit anticommunist foundation based in Alexandria, Virginia, run by Andy Messing and Representative Robert Dornan, which provides aid to the anti-Sandinista fighters in Nicaragua. Gomez resigned from the group in January and has formed the National Defense Council Agency,

which he says does not send aid to the *contras*.

"We see the same tragic thing happening in Nicaragua that happened in Cuba," says Álvarez. "Their revolution has been stolen by Castro and the Soviets. We feel it is our duty to help the Nicaraguans recapture the revolution." Nevertheless, brigade members are worried that the U.S. government might lead the *contras* to believe they have its full support, then abandon them as it did the brigade.

The former secret agents meet at irregular intervals, but each December there is a dinner in Miami for all members from the United States and abroad. At the most recent dinner, Santiago Morales, now 44, who spent eighteen years in a Cuban prison, joined his comrades in an emotional reunion. He had not been executed, he said, "because I was only 18 when I joined the brigade as an agent and looked like a young boy. When I was caught I had been operating alone and they could not relate me to a specific incident."

Most of the brigade members, now middle-aged, have settled down to life in the United States, where they have pursued successful careers, particularly the former agents. They include doctors, lawyers, engineers, a Florida State Representative, a vice president of the World Bank, an Army general, a vice president of Eastern Airlines and a host of successful businessmen. One is chief of President Reagan's bipartisan advisory commission on Radio Martí. They say they are willing to fight again under the right circumstances, but some have reasons different from those they had twenty-five years ago. Captain Eduardo B. Ferrer was one of forty-four pilots and air crew members of Brigade 2506 and a hero of the air battle. Now a senior pilot with Eastern Airlines, he says he would fight again for the cause of liberty for his former homeland, but his life and work would remain in this country. He had flown for Cuba's civil airline, Cubana de Aviación, and is the only commercial pilot ever to hijack his own aircraft to defect from a Soviet-bloc country.

Ferrer, like all the brigade survivors I interviewed, feels no bitterness toward the C.I.A. Debates may continue elsewhere, but for the brigade leaders the blame rests with one man, President John Kennedy. Ferrer says Kennedy made several mistakes, the most egregious being the cancellation of a second planned air strike, which was to have completed the destruction of Castro's military aircraft on the ground. The change in plans allowed Castro's remaining airplanes to sink the invading ships and pin down the beachhead. Kennedy also insisted on a more difficult and dangerous nighttime assault and made an eleventh-hour change in the planned landing site to a much riskier one. Moreover, the President insisted that the C.I.A., rather than the military, direct planning and operations.

Ferrer agrees with Adm. Arleigh Burke, then the head of the U.S. Navy and a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, that cancellation of the air strike was tantamount to a death warrant for the brigade. When the invasion was in its final throes, Admiral Burke begged the President to let him save the effort with a few Navy aircraft from a U.S. carrier that was in sight of the battle. Kennedy refused, saying he did not want the United States to be involved. Burke cried out in frustration, "Goddamn it, we are involved, Mr. President,

and there is no way we can hide it!" In 1980 Burke told brigade leaders that the invasion taught one not to accept without question orders from a national leader because of being overawed by his position. "We should have questioned his judgment when we saw he was wrong."

Brigade association president Álvarez believes that the United States should not undertake programs that could become half-measures. "Half-measures are worse than none because they nullify other options. I resent the fact that those who did the fighting were not allowed to participate in the planning."

Now brigade members live with a dream tempered by reality. As time passes they realize that their chances of deposing Castro have become remote. Some find this truth painful. José Basulto says: "I am financially successful, with all the worldly possessions I need. Yet I can never be completely happy until Cuba is liberated. We made a tremendous psychological commitment and this has caused a great deal of stress for years." The lesson of the Bay of Pigs, according to Basulto, is that the United States must know what it wants and go for it openly instead of using covert operations. "The C.I.A. was not entirely competent, but they are not to blame. It was the White House. The saddest message I received from the C.I.A. on my radio was the final one on April 17: 'Do not transmit any more. SURVIVE.'"

At almost the same time on the beachhead at Playa Girón, the brigade military commander sent a last emotional message to the C.I.A. base in the United States: "I will not be evacuated. We shall fight to the end. This is where we have to die. We shall never abandon our homeland."

Recently, the brigade built a \$250,000 permanent headquarters and museum in Miami. Some of the money came from the city but most of it was donated by members and admirers. The museum will be dedicated on April 17. Former U.N. ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick will give the main address; the Mayor of Miami and several members of Congress will also speak.

Many in the brigade feel that in addition to fighting for their homeland they served as U.S. military forces carrying out the policy of this country. Claude Pepper and Representative Mark Siljander of Michigan, a member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee and an adviser to the National Defense Council, have promised to introduce legislation giving the survivors the same benefits U.S. veterans receive.

Three recent events have brought cheer and renewed hope to the brigade members:

§ The invasion of Grenada.

§ President Reagan's declaration of "no more Cubas in the hemisphere."

§ The establishment of Radio Martí, the U.S. Information Agency station broadcasting to Cuba.

But in their heart of hearts they surely know that an invasion of Cuba is not likely to occur. What might have taken only a battalion of marines in 1961 would now require as many as seven divisions and entail immense losses: it would be a Pyrrhic victory. Also, in the absence of a *casus belli*, the dream of overthrowing Castro remains what it was twenty-five years ago—a dream. □